



Restaurant in Japantown



Jackson Street grocery stores take full advantage of the sidewalks



Milk Tea is served in several establishments in Chinatown



Entry Point into Little Saigon - Jackson Street

## The Neighborhoods, Industrial Area, and Jackson Street

Chinatown, Nihonmachi, Little Saigon - International District  
Urban Design Streetscape and Open Space Master Plan

The three neighborhoods Chinatown, Japantown and Little Saigon encompass a rich history of events and commercial activities. That history needs to be celebrated and preserved. As these neighborhoods are defined as special ethnic areas, our ability to market the general Community will significantly increase, benefiting business interests in the District. Through public art and other methods, we must also respect the contributions of those other groups who have developed this District, such as the Filipino, African-American, and Native American communities.

Defining a specific location with outlined boundaries for the three major groups aforementioned is difficult as various ethnic groups and uses utilize every corner of the District. A geographic boundary, however has been assigned to each of these three ethnic groups to illuminate the special culture, identity, and history of that place. Although broadly defined on a map, each ethnic neighborhood will have a specifically defined street or intersection defining its core area, which we have labeled throughout this process as spines.

In addition, although community can be defined through the lens of geography, the nature of our District demands that we view community in a broader sense. Many individuals who do not live in this District consider themselves community members. They may be family association members, long-time employees, business owners, artists, volunteers, and others. They have an affinity towards this District due to its cultural vibrancy and historical depth and richness.

## Chinatown

King Street is the traditional heart of Chinatown. This street has embraced the major retail and restaurant spine of the Chinese American population for nearly a century. However, pertinent Chinese businesses and landmarks have spread throughout the area bound by

the I-5 freeway and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue (on the east and west) and Jackson and Dearborn Streets (on the north and south). Located at the intersection of King Street and Maynard Avenue, Hing Hay Park is one of the most prominent open spaces in the Community. The park is a place for pedestrians and a central gathering space for daily routines and special events. The Summer Festival takes advantage of the park, King Street, and other Chinatown streets, which are closed off from automobile



Summer Fair in Chinatown

In addition, events like the 30 year traffic on the event. Night Parade strolls past Hing Hay Park and other streets in Chinatown. Although Hing Hay Park is mostly paved, large trees in the park provide a nice canopy for people to relax under.

The surrounding historic buildings provide a strong sense of place and could be very charming if so many were not boarded up. The most pressing, ongoing challenge for this area is the seven vacant or partially vacant buildings, either on or within a block of King Street. A report written by the Community Action Partnership (CAP) explains that problems associated with vacant buildings include: crime in and around buildings, the threat of buildings collapsing on firefighters in case of a fire, and health issues related to failing structures and pest infestations that act as vectors for disease. Drug use, prostitution, assaults and other illegal activities are a problem in this area, particularly in dark alleyways. The sale of cheap alcohol in several stores contributes to this problem (From interviews with CAP staff). CAP's report recommends that a vacant building ordinance be adopted for the District to protect adjacent property values and

businesses. CAP refers to Portland's "disruptive" buildings ordinance, as well as programs in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. that register vacant buildings, where the sale of buildings can be enforced.

Ostensibly, vacant buildings not only detract from the aesthetic value in this community, but also present a major marketing problem for businesses, as well as public safety challenges for the neighborhood at large. The solutions for resolving this issue may lie within a combination of incentives that help current owners



King Street with boarded up windows

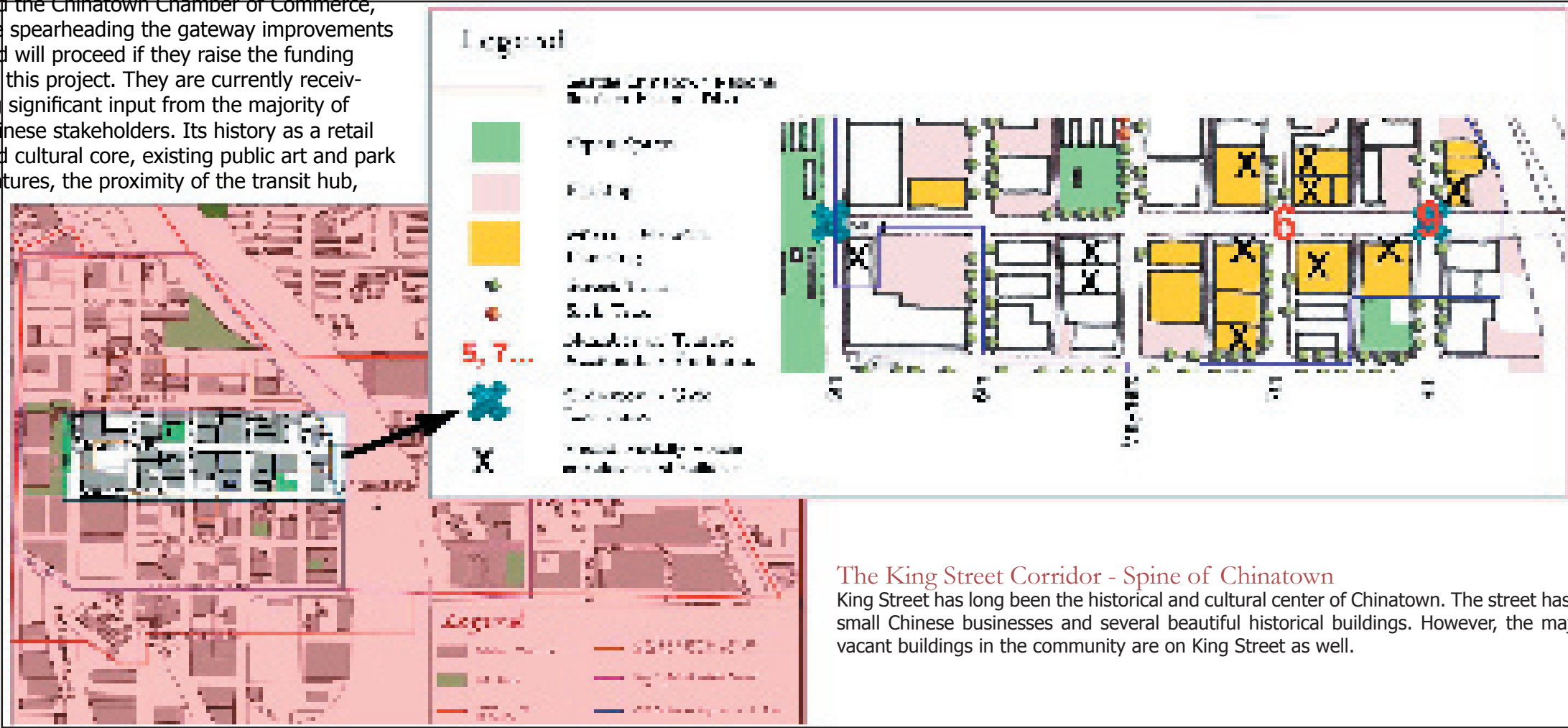
find solutions in redeveloping their buildings and disincentives that apply pressure on them to either sell, redevelop or protect their buildings from further deterioration. In the appendix, a list of existing incentive-based programs are listed that owners may use in resolving vacant building dilemmas. In addition, community-based non-profit developers located in this community can assist in stitching together the financial requirements to make a rehabilitation project work. A committee of various stakeholders will also attempt to talk with these various building owners about this issue. However, complicated relationships in the ownership structure, community politics, speculation, and/or personal inertia have hindered the development of these buildings. If correctly designed, disincentive programs may push owners to act – such as actually enforcing building code violations (encouraging the City to act), public pressure, and the threat and/or use of condemnation.



Promoting their cultural identity has been very important to the Chinese community who have strongly advocated for the use of Chinatown as the name of the District or as part of the name. In addition, strong emphasis was given in seeking to improve Hing Hay Park and to mark the entries to the King Street spine at 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> avenues with traditional Chinese gates. Two established, Chinese based organizations, Chong Wa Benevolent Association and the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce, are spearheading the gateway improvements and will proceed if they raise the funding for this project. They are currently receiving significant input from the majority of Chinese stakeholders. Its history as a retail and cultural core, existing public art and park features, the proximity of the transit hub,

lower traffic volumes, and the recommendations of previous planning reports all indicate that King Street should become a pedestrian oriented street. Gateways at 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> avenues would begin to slow traffic even further and demarcate this street section as a special place. Extending the brick paving out from Hing Hay Park to make a more expansive public square would further slow traffic, providing pedestrians a safer walking

environment. Several issues remain to making this Chinatown vibrant, including the issue of vacant buildings, unsafe and unsanitary alleys, and the needed physical improvements of Hing Hay Park (which are discussed in the Open Space section).



## Japantown

The Japanese American community has lived in the District for more than a century. Inhabiting areas around the Yesler Terrace area before World War II and blocks south of Jackson street, Japantown, also known as Nihonmachi, has shrunk to the area north of Jackson Street and south of Yesler Way, west of the I-5 freeway and east of 4th Avenue. However, the Uwajimaya Village development and Japanese ownership of three city blocks demarcates the extension of Japanese-American influenced businesses south of Jackson Street.

Before World War II, this neighborhood had bathhouses and laundries, hotels, teahouses, groceries, doctors, schools, and a theater. Fifth Avenue and Main Street housed the first Uwajimaya store, before it moved south of Jackson Street. It was a thriving community until the internment of all Japanese Americans during World War II when families were sent away to internment camps. While many people returned to Japantown to run hotels, shops or other businesses after the war, many had lost their businesses and began new lives elsewhere.

The intersection of Sixth Avenue and Main Street has been the historical center of the Japanese American community in Seattle. Uwajimaya's presence on Sixth Avenue and several Japanese small businesses, including the Panama teahouse, on Main Street reflects the continued importance of the two spines of this community. Much of Japantown, however, has transformed over the last fifty years, where many buildings have been leveled and turned into surface parking lots. Main Street, Japantown's core, is no longer a bustling street of commerce and pedestrian activity. It lacks a mix of uses and activities.

As documented by historians like University of Washington professor Gail Dubrow, historic Japanese districts are disappearing nationally. However, Dr. Dubrow argues that Seattle's

Japantown is the most intact Japanese American district in the United States, especially considering that exceptional buildings like the Nippon Kan Theater, the NP Hotel, the old Japanese Language School, and the Panama Teahouse and Hotel, with the original Japanese bathhouse, are still standing. Besides these historic resources, a strong Japanese American community lives throughout the Puget Sound area and utilizes the various amenities in Japantown, as well as the Chinatown and Little Saigon neighborhoods. The Uwajimaya Village development, several family-owned restaurants and other businesses, the recently renovated Panama Teahouse, and the NP Hotel are prominent reminders that the Japanese American community still plays a prominent role in this District.

The Danny Woo International District Community Gardens is another example of a vibrant presence in the neighborhood. In the mid-1970's blackberry brambles were systematically removed from the garden's hillside by community



Panama Hotel



Pig Roast at the Danny Woo International District Community Garden in the mid-1990's

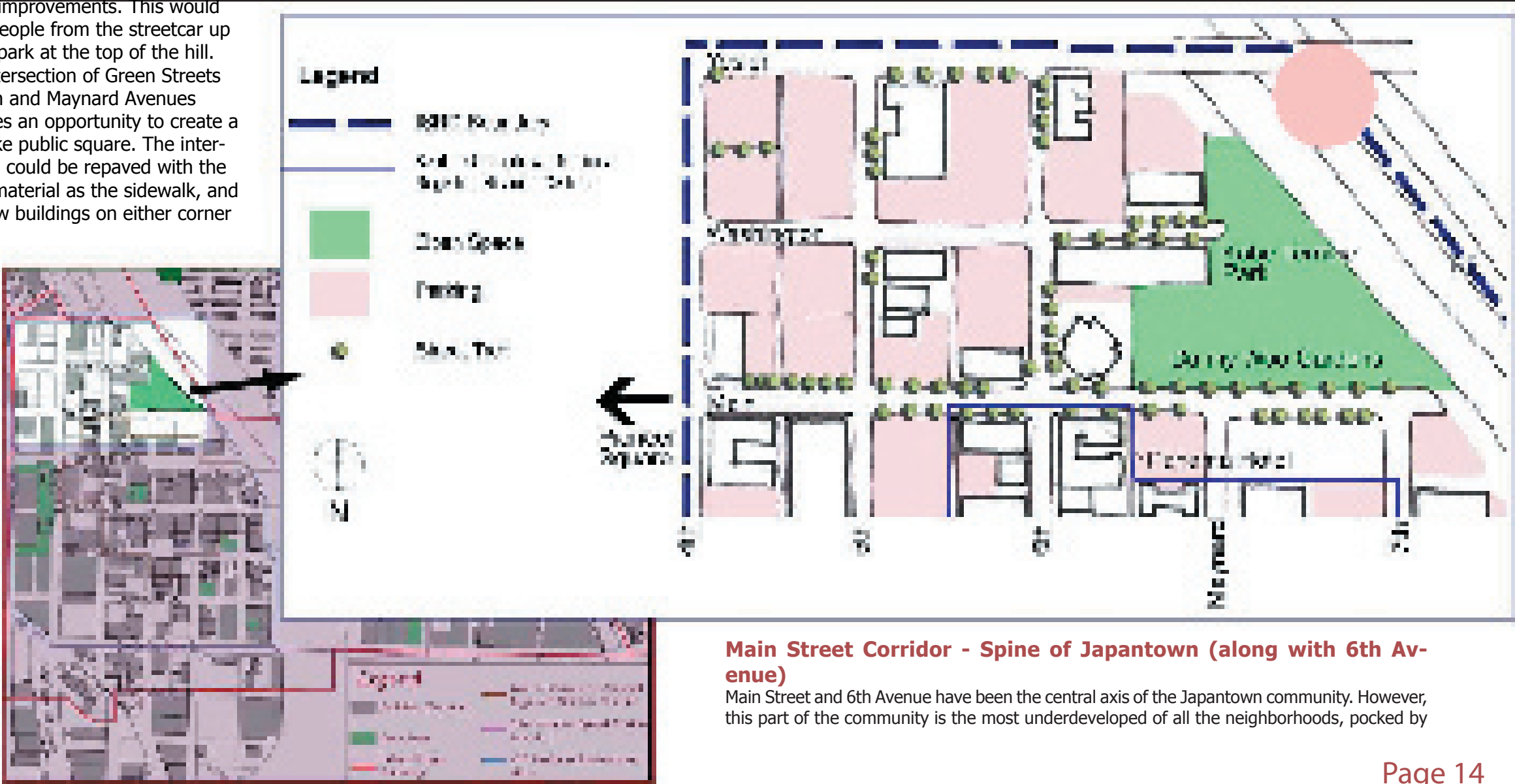
activists. This garden is still a vibrant, vital, and important resource for the community, as it is constantly being cared for by community residents and social organizations. InterIm, who manages this space, has made a concerted effort over the last five years to prune the trees throughout the Garden, including the trees along Main Street. The added visibility of garden activities enriches and enlivens the streetscape along Main Street and down Maynard Avenue into Chinatown. In addition, Japantown has Kobe Terrace Park and two designated Green Streets providing the opportunity of developing Japantown as a very unique part of Seattle. Topographically, Japantown rises up on a hillside with sweeping views of Elliott Bay and Beacon Hill. In addition, the waterfront streetcar line that goes through the Pioneer Square area terminates in the Japantown neighborhood.

The numerous empty lots and surface parking areas need to be analyzed, considering that this area may be a source of tremendous growth in the next decade. These developments will impact the streets, open space residential ratio, businesses, and livability for the greater community. Consequently, the District needs to promote a community-driven vision for how potential new developments should be stitched together.

New construction will attract more residents and retail, consequently enlivening Main Street and enhancing Kobe Terrace Park and the Danny Woo International District Community Garden as safe, active public open spaces. However, new construction should be sensitive to the sunlight and views of the park and garden and to the scale and architectural integrity of the surrounding historic structures. Mixed-use buildings with parking below grade or behind the structure, restaurants and

retail on the ground floor, and housing above would best encourage pedestrian activity. The connection to Japantown from Pioneer Square would be strengthened with strategic wayfinding that is integrated with Green Street improvements. This would draw people from the streetcar up to the park at the top of the hill. The intersection of Green Streets at Main and Maynard Avenues provides an opportunity to create a park-like public square. The intersection could be repaved with the same material as the sidewalk, and the new buildings on either corner

could be designed with gardens and plazas on the corners to define the public square.





## Little Saigon

The area east of the I-5 freeway is called Little Saigon. It falls completely outside the Chinatown-International District Business Improvement Area (CIDBIA) and partially outside the International Special Review District (ISRD). The marked difference in the neighborhood's character of the streetscape and buildings can be viewed once the pedestrian crosses underneath the I-5 viaduct. Jackson Street and 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue is considered to be the hub, the two spines, and the most important intersection for the Vietnamese community. In addition to the Vietnamese community, other ethnic centers and facilities are based in this area, such as three major Native American facilities and organizations, the Nissee Veterans Center, and the Asian Resource Center.

Due to a lack of organizational capacity, the Little Saigon neighborhood seldom receives the benefits from projects that are initiated in Chinatown and Japantown. The parking and lighting studies, conducted primarily for Chinatown, for example, do not include the area east of the freeway. As a result, most of the information guiding this section of this study comes from public comments during workshops, professional field notes, and observations.

Most of the Vietnamese community lives outside of the Little Saigon area and visits to eat and shop there.



Improvised outdoor market at 12th Ave. and King St.

Consequently, due to the zoning in this area, the type of development in this neighborhood has been oriented toward automobile accessibility instead of pedestrians. Consequently, strip mall style buildings with

parking in front has been built, which starkly contrasts with Chinatown's zero lot line, pedestrian-friendly development. In the Little Saigon neighborhood, the pedestrian experience is chaotic with poorly defined edges and cues to wayfinding. The streetscape is dominated by a patchwork of irregular shaped buildings with frontages set back from the sidewalk, often facing into parking lots rather than the street. Buildings are also surrounded by poorly designed asphalt parking lots that do not adequately consider grading and drainage.

Although the sidewalks are relatively wide (18' on Jackson and 12' on 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue), they are sometimes dangerous to the pedestrian because they are blocked by trash dumpsters, interrupted by parking lot drive-ways, and damaged sidewalks. One major improvement in the streetscape evolved from business owners who came together in 1997 to plant Cherry trees along



Shopping on Jackson St. sidewalks

Jackson Street. While it was an important step in working together, the trees' small size are out of scale with Jackson Street. In addition, many of these trees are failing and some need to be replaced. The planting of cherry trees, however, was an important step in building community, an effort that must continue to solve other issues.

In creating a place where people shop and dine in multiple places, we will need to make this intersection a place where people want to linger through developing a system of walkways and open spaces (plazas) where people can meet, eat outside, window shop, and easily get around. In addition, any land use changes and new developments should encourage pedestrian friendly development, instead of the non-urban strip-mall type of

commercial development primarily built there.

Creating a Business Improvement Area that business owners feel they have a voice in, may be the first step in creating a stronger, more developed physical environment for this neighborhood. The ensuing step is to gradually help build the capacity of the Business Improvement Association, while making significant physical and economic changes. Making basic improvements like replacing street trees, concealing garbage dumpsters, and providing trash cans at bus stops would all send the message that the streetscape is cared for by the community. Creating identity for the neighborhood through simple banners and public art symbolic of Southeast Asian American cultures could be another initiative coordinated through an organization like a Business Improvement Area. Ideas like consolidated or pooled parking might become a possibility with a Business Improvement Area in place, consequently reducing the overhead load for all businesses.

Public art features that demarcate the Districts boundaries can serve as Community gateways to the neighborhood's entry points. Little Saigon borders several neighborhoods including Beacon Hill at the Jose Rizal Bridge, Jackson Place at Jackson Street and Rainier Avenue, Rainier Valley at Dearborn and Rainier, and the 12<sup>th</sup> avenue Planning District/First Hill neighborhood in the 12<sup>th</sup> avenue, Boren Avenue, Yesler Way, and Main Street intersection.



Jackson St. with cherry trees

As businesses redevelop their properties to maximize their property values, parking should be moved behind or underneath buildings. Frontages should meet the sidewalk to better define the street, provide interest to pedestrians, and present an opportunity to better merchandize products. In addition, some parking lots on corners should become plazas with potential for outdoor dining, seating, and landscaping. Redevelopment should include housing above and behind these retail spaces to take advantage of the deep lots the neighbor-

hood layout provides. This would also help to generate a “live-in” customer base for businesses. Consequently, zoning changes that would encourage expanding the housing capacity could stabilize the economic situation within this neighborhood.



**12th Avenue and Jackson Street - Little Saigon’s Main Intersection**

12th and Jackson is the primary intersection of the Little Saigon neighborhood. This recent immigrant group has rebuilt this area into a vibrant, commercial neighborhood. However, the area is plagued with car oriented, strip mall development and little housing to support its long-term commercial interest.

Jackson Street

Jackson Street is the major arterial linking Pioneer Square and the Stadium Area, Japantown, Chinatown, Little Saigon, Jackson Place, and the Central District. Jackson Street also links two of Seattle’s major bodies of water, Lake Washington and Puget Sound. City Design includes it as part of its streetscape and open space improvement plan called the Blue Ring, which is intended to better link park-like streets and open spaces in Seattle’s downtown. Jackson runs through what will become the largest transit hub in the city between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> avenues. Historically, Jackson Street was also known as a major corridor housing many Jazz clubs in the early to mid-1900s. Jackson Street is wide with busy traffic dividing the street making pedestrian crossing dangerous, creating the highest incidence of known traffic accidents in the District. A need for pedestrian crossings that are marked and lighted has been cited on every neighborhood plan since the 1960s. Curb bulbs were installed along Jackson between 4<sup>th</sup> and I-5 for pedestrian safety many years ago, and lighted pedestrian crossing signs have been recently installed at 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> avenues.

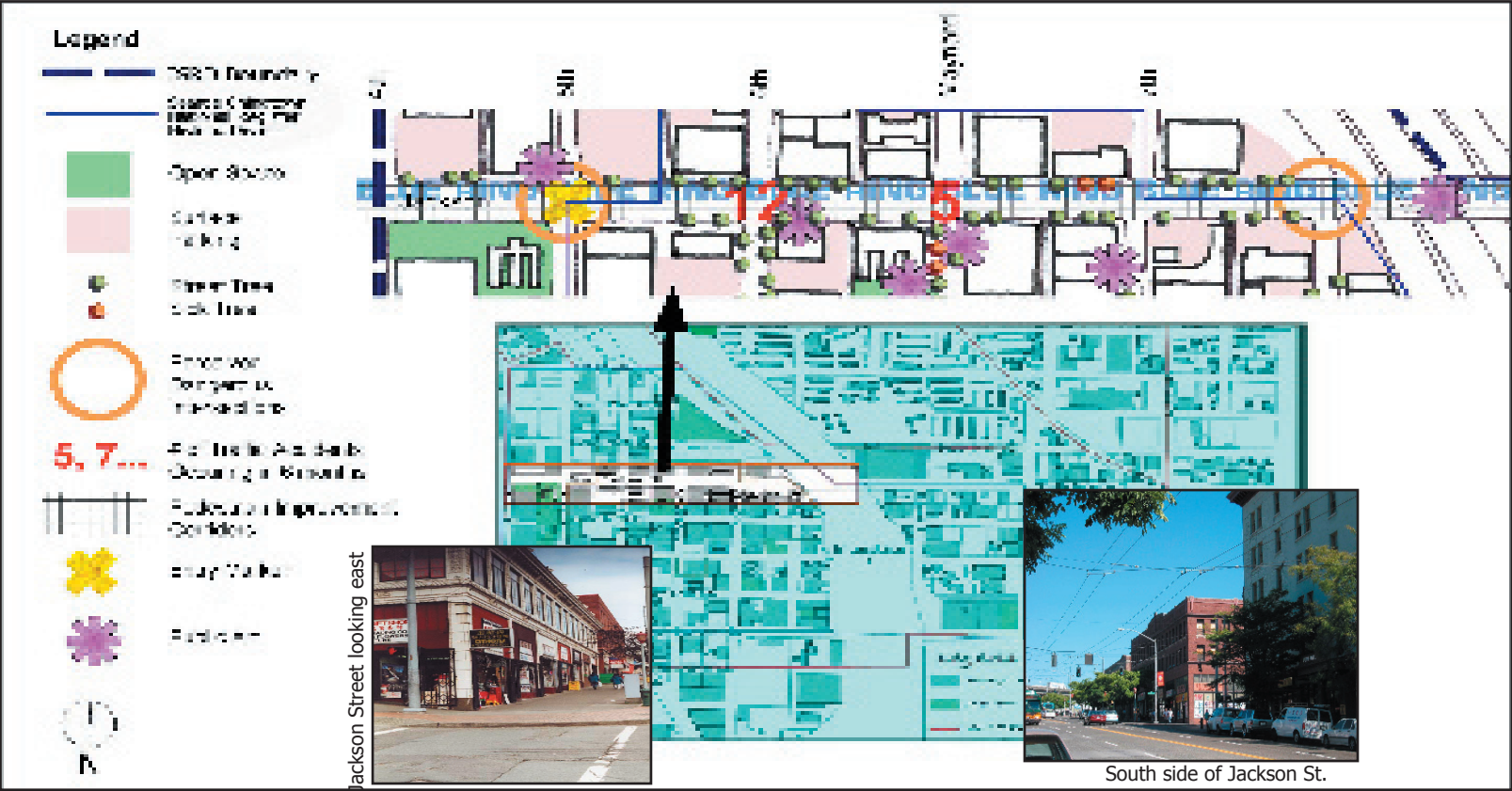
Jackson has wide sidewalks of a minimum of 18 feet and has a regular rhythm of businesses fronting the street. There are two types of street trees along Jackson, Japanese walnuts from 5<sup>th</sup> to I-5 and cherry trees from I-5 to Rainier. The street is pleasant to walk along from 4<sup>th</sup> to I-5 with

short blocks, businesses fronting the street and many pedestrian amenities.

While public art and painted columns help enliven the walk under the freeway, it still functions as a psychological and visual barrier for pedestrians. Further east on Jackson, the streetscape character changes in how the building interacts with the street. As aforementioned in the Little Saigon section, Jackson Street east of the highway is mainly dominated by strip malls, run down commercial spaces, and surface parking lots.

The image of Jackson as a grand boulevard could easily be strengthened and serve as a gateway for the whole community with the addition of more street trees, pub-

lic art, and banners that feature all the cultures present in the District. A complete transit study can help determine whether that boulevard can become more pedestrian and transit oriented. For example, a landscaped median has been suggested in previous discussions within the community, which would enhance the streetscape. The South Downtown Lighting Study prepared by NBBJ for the South Downtown Foundation and the CIDBIA, suggests that the community should install new, even lighting for Jackson Street that would improve visibility for pedestrians and automobiles. New street lighting should be carried all the way through to Rainier and reflect the Asian character of the District which would help with wayfinding.



**Jackson Street** is a major street in the Blue Ring scheme, which was developed by the City to help improve the open spaces and streetscapes of Seattle’s downtown area. The street also connects the Little Saigon, Japantown and Chinatown neighborhoods. However, the street is not friendly to pedestrians and does not have the character that a prominent corridor should embody.



**Industrial Area**

The border of the industrial area can be drawn from King Street to Dearborn and the freeway to Rainier. The primary industrial uses are the following: warehousing, processing and manufacturing. The area also houses significant industries like the Seattle Indian Center, Seattle Indian Health Board, the Marpac offices,

and several Asian food warehouses. Many of these businesses often require shipping yards and loading docks, many of which front the streets and make placement of pedestrian lighting and street trees difficult. However, there is not a great need or draw for pedestrian traffic on these streets. If these areas were to be rezoned for multi-family housing or mixed-

use there would be greater need to make them more pedestrian friendly. Upzoning this neighborhood may be a desirable step that would support the businesses in the Little Saigon community and help bring greater continuity in urban form from the Jackson Place



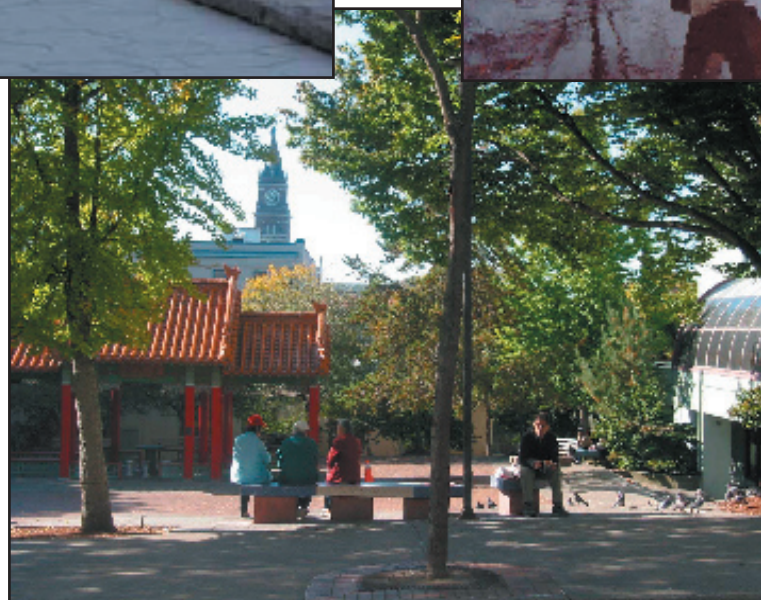
Union Station Plaza



International Children's Park



Danny Woo International District  
Community Garden



Hing Hay Park

# Open Space